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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a broad discussion of the importance of a child's attachment to his mother and the relationship of such attachment to the child's optimal psychic development. Research at the Children's Unit of the Eastern Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute (which focused on children's aggression and gender formation) is described. This research indicates that even "good" mothers, because of lack of formal and technical training for parenthood, too often do not understand their child's attachment to them and so are unable to handle even normal conflicts. Based on this assumption, some parameters of "good-enough" mothering are defined. Examples from clinical encounters with mother-child groups are used to support the contention that adequate education for parenthood must be incorporated into high school curricula. (ED)

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RESEARCH IN NORMAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR PRIMARY PREVENTION

by Henri Parens, M.D.

(Presented to Grand Rounds, The Medical College of Pennsylvania, Wednesday, March 6, 1974; and to the 8th International Congress of the International Association for Child Psychiatry and Allied Professions, Philadelphia, July 31, 1974.)

I would like to present to you a singular finding and some thoughts which derive from our ongoing Early Child Development Program which is carried out at the Children's Unit of the Eastern Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute.

Nearly 5 years ago, we set out to study correlations of certain parameters in the mother-child relationship with certain parameters in the child's psychic and emotional development. We proceeded with known psychoanalytic theories--I identify them as theories, not hypotheses, because they have been shown to hold up under decades of clinical scrutiny--: that the child's optimal psychic development, the development of his ego and superego, requires a relation to the mother or mothering person, in which that mother is sufficiently emotionally available to her child, as Mahler has put it. This was proposed essentially by Freud (1923, 1926) and has been amply documented by the work of Anna Freud, Margaret Mahler, Rene Spitz, and numerous other psychoanalytic clinician-investigators. This fundamental psychoanalytic formulation highlights the importance of the qualitative aspects of the child's attachment to the mother. Ethologists, Lorenz in particular, have documented and described the phenomenon of imprinting, a primary

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object attachment which occurs in many animal species, a phenomenon no doubt imposed by evolution to insure the preservation of the species. The correlary of imprinting in humans, as explained by psychoanalysts, requires an extremely important condition. Let me simplify briefly: whereas animals will imprint--that is, attach to any object with specific but not species-exclusive characteristics which are present during the critical period for imprinting--humans because of their immaturity at birth (altriciality) do not have imprinting available to them and require that the mother invest sufficiently emotionally in her child in order for a sufficient emotional investment of the mother on the part of the child to be assured. If the human mother sufficiently invests emotionally in her child, the child is primed psychobiologically to invest emotionally in her, to attach to her. We are speaking of course of the formation of an object cathexis, the attachment of emotional investment in a person who thereby becomes valued by the child.

To sum it up, the reason this step is so important to the child's evolving psychic development, is that from this object cathexis, this emotional investment in the mother (and father), by means of identifications with this (these) object, the child's ego and superego will develop. (Allow me to remind you that the ego is the psychic organ of adaptation to life, and the superego is the organ of adaptation to society since it contains the conscience and the ideals for living.)

In the course of our researches--which soon came to focus on aggression and later, in addition, on early gender formation--one most significant finding progressively made itself known to us. This finding, met with over and over also by every mental health clinician, is that good

mothers, 'good-enough mothers' as Winnicott formulated it, because of a lack of formal and technical training for parenthood too often do not foster optimally their child's attachment to them, too often do not understand their children's needs and behaviors. This generally applies even more to fathers. Because they do not sufficiently understand children's emotional needs, parents too often cannot evaluate what is a normal demand in their child, which demand ought to be gratified and which benevolently frustrated. Similarly, too often they cannot choose the proper alternative to handling problematical behavior; indeed, many times they interfere with, impede behavior that is not only reasonable but in fact, growth-promoting. I have the image in mind of a mother who perhaps 20 times a day more or less, has to decide between alternatives to handling both problematical and aproblematical behavior without a feeling of assurance that the alternative she selects is a good one for her child at a given time.

Now, I don't want to distort, just because I want to emphasize a point. Many parents have a very good intuitive feel of what is good and not good for their child; this comes particularly to those who can feel within themselves the residua of their own childhood yearnings as well as their own past growth-promoting and growth-inhibiting experiences.

What is <u>good-enough mothering</u>? The definition is surely self-evident. 'Good-enough mothering' can be defined as consisting in providing a physical and emotional environment in which a particular child's growth can proceed without excessive anxieties, emotional strains and arrests in development. Stated more positively, it is mothering which insures in the child an optimal-enough psychic development. It includes

the provision of sufficient gratification of the child's physical and emotional needs; which must include the knowledge of what the needs of infants and children are, needs which change in the course of the child's development. The mother must recognize the variance in endowment of the drives and the ego of her particular child. Basic is the child's need for a positive-enough emotional relation with the mother, to secure a positive-enough object cathexis (emotional tie) from which the character of the ego and the superego must evolve. To achieve this end the mother must have the capacity to be sufficiently emotionally available to her child. She must effect an optimal-enough matching of her needs as a mother and individual with those of her off-spring at the different stages of his or her development. To achieve this end, having a child must be sufficiently ego-syntonic, and sufficiently emotionally gratifying. The mother must be able to integrate having a child with her other fundamental individual needs, such as the fulfillment of life-long identifications and self-images, as in some instances of being a professional person. One can, of course, be a good-enough mother and work outside the home. What must be fulfilled above all is the establishment of a positive enough emotional relation with the child, not so much how many hours a day one spends with that child, although, of course, a minimum of time is a requirement to maintain a good relationship. For some unfortunate children whose abusive mothers are at home all day, it would be well for those mothers to go to work in order to protect their children against the mothers' resentments and hates.

What we found from our work is what I want to emphasize here: That becoming a 'good enough mother' is greatly facilitated, the same applies

to being 'good enough fathers', when one has some basic understanding of the complex nature of human psychic development.

Observational Note: From the time their children were about 6 months old, two of the mothers would 'sneak out' when they had to leave their children--as for an appointment or shopping--because they felt they might thereby avoid creating a separation reaction in their child. They did not know that such disappearing acts for which the child is not prepared and of which he is not aware, at such times of infantile omnipotence and magical thinking seriously endangers the development of basic trust (Erikson, 1959). Explanations of this matter was at first startling to these mothers, they had never been told this before, and they found no cues to it from their own repressed experiences.

Discussions of thumbsucking, separation and stranger reactions took place frequently. Some of the mothers could not discern anxiety from orneriness. They did not know when to yield to their children's wishes, or when to frustrate benevolently. Too often they gratify, or they frustrate at the wrong time. When they are reprimanded by their mothers, 2-year-olds often become upset. Naturally, the average normal 2-year-old when upset seeks comfort from his mother. On such occasions, several mothers would reject the child's requests for comforting, feeling that since they had just scolded their child, the child was now trying to 'butter her up' and the mother would spoil the child by comforting him. Besides, the lesson to be learned would be defeated. The mothers did not know that comforting the scolded child can: 1. make him learn the lesson better since the admonition would be repeated by the comforting mother at a time when her influence is greatest, rather than its being

repeated by the fantasied bad mother whom the infant wishes to destroy; and, 2. it insures the fusion of good with frustrating mother representations, protect against splitting object representation, and hence secure a more adbanced stage of object relatedness. Indeed rejecting the child re-enforces splitting by strengthening unduely the influence of the bad-frustrating mother image. After a number of efforts at explainin these concepts, in lay terms of course, all but one of the mothers dealt with this matter most successfully.

Talking about children's interests in babies and their genitals was introduced by a 3½-year-old sister of one of our research subjects who set a shock wave through several of the mother by announcing that she wants to have a baby. This has been a long and slow road to travel with some. But it is one, which when carefully dealt with can be most beneficial in setting mothers more at ease in dealing with their children's unavoidable early sexual interests. For example, one of our most skillful and very good mothers had a lovely relationship with her 7th child. Much warmth, compatibility and comfort characterized this relation. When Jane was about 2½ years old, we began to see a significant change in their relationship, with behavior on Jane's part that led to a good deal of impatience, annoyance and anger on the part of her mother. After several months, the mother walked in once and with half a smile said: "Anyone want her for a year?" While this was said lightly enough, it gave us the cue to begin to explain that Jane was entering her Oedipus Complex. We let Jane provide us with the data from which we could illustrate and gradually explain this pehnomenon to the mothers. We were impressed with how readily some of the mothers, by the

feelings stirred in them by the daughters and sons, could appreciate this complex and insufficiently talked about development. Because this mother could understand her child's behavior better, she could deal with it better, less conflictually at least on her part if not on her daughter's part. We are all well acquainted with the influence the parents' conflicts have on their children. There are many more examples.

I submit that more people work as parents, have the job of being parents, than do any other kind of work. Yet, it is the one job which requires a great deal of technical knowledge, enourmous skills, for which no training is required and no education is formally imparted. Parents do their parenting intuitively, they have done this for centuries, and that might go towards explaining why so many children and adults are so disturbed so much of the time.

It seems to have gone unrecognized that there is much teachable knowledge, teachable skills in mothering, in parenting. The best effort in the acquisition of knowledge we have had so far, and it is of recent vintage, is two-fold; a. Writers like Margaret Ribble, like Benjamin Spock, have volunteered to answer questions asked by parents, mothers in particular; and, b. Many mothers have asked questions of people like Spock and Ribble, and have read the books and articles available.

But what profession or field, where much knowledge as well as skill are required, accepts that type of training? It is well known that preparation for parenthood begins in one's identifications with one's parents and one's fantasies about being a parent--as one sees in children's play. Then the workshop for parenting is our first child. In my opinion, it is only because there are special advantages to being a first-born that

not more of them are more disturbed. I want to emphasize that we have failed ourselves by not recognizing parenthood, motherhood in particular, as a job that requires much knowledge and special skills, perhaps even as a profession.

From our Early Child Development Program, we have come especially to know, as we know too from our clinical experience, that there is much knowledge mothers and fathers lack which they can learn. For example, we have found much misunderstanding of what thumb sucking is all about, what transitional objects (security blankets) do for children, what stranger anxiety means, what separation anxiety reflects, what the separation-individuation process achieves. Many parents know nothing about the Oedipus Complex, what it does for and to children. Many parents do not know whether these phenomena are good, bad, or indifferent; nor how to deal with undesirable as well as desirable elements in them.

It is on the basis of this finding that one of our projects has as its aim, to investigate the manner in which curricula for parenthood can be instituted in formal education in high schools, and perhaps in elementary and junior high schools as well. I could see, for example, a course in Child Development, to include: basic emotional needs, the nature of the instinctual drives, of the development of the ego and the superego, the process of separation-individuation, the theory of the Oedipus Complex. We must give thought to how much of these are teachable; some may argue that one cannot teach children about the Oedipus Complex; they may be right, but I am certain that these concepts can be taught to children. I could also see a course in Object Relations Theory; it would explain, for example, in details that an object cathexis by effecting

identifications leads to the development of skills for adaptation, ideals for the self, and a sense of morality. It would also spell out the epigenesis of human dependenc .

I would even venture to ask if our educational priorities, which I know are reassessed from time to time, may not require a going over with questions such as: Is arithmetic more important than child development? Is geography more important than understanding a parent's relation to her or his child? No doubt, much better questions can be formulated by educators.

In closing then we have come to find that there is much knowledge deriving from the corpus of our ever expanding psychoanalytic child development theory that is teachable. It can be taught to mothers in vivo, in interaction with their children, in a group-type setting as we have developed here. While we knew that we could help these mothers we did not anticipate the impressive extent to which that help has been effective. There is, in my opinion, no guess work as to what the element is which has made their task as mothers easier, and prevented in a number of instances the surfacing potential development of emotional problems: it was our explanations of the meaning of the child's behavior, of the dynamics which motivated it as these could be ascertained from observations. It is not necessary to make a psychiatrist or social worker of a mother in order to impart to her information, explanation, and meaning of her child's too frequently not understood behavior. It is also well to add that while there is still much we professionals do not know, there is on the other hand, a great deal that is known and organized into elements of a highly sophisticated psychoanalytic child development theory.

Our last note consists of two recommendations: 1. For the present generation that has already achieved parenthood, an achievement which required no formal or technical education, it is the domain of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers trained in child development theory, especially I would insist psychoanalytic child development theory, to provide them with a service which I would like to identify as "Prevention, Early-Intervention mother-child groups." In addition to our original research group, two other mother-infant groups are in progress at EPPI, in the Children's Unit.

2. For our children who will also achieve parenthood without formal or technical preparation for it, it becomes imperative that we develop curriculae that can be given at least at the high school level, and perhaps at the Elementary and Junior High level. I submit that this recommendation has to be researched and developed, a project which we are undertaking in our Early Child Development Program.